Crooked, Stephens and West Runs and Willow Brook Water Quality Improvement Plan

Agricultural Working Group Meeting: Lord Fairfax Community College

January 28, 2016

PARTICIPANTS

Sandra Ritenour	David Beahm	Matt Wolanski
Wayne Webb	Greg Huffman	Mac McComas
Billy Staples	Debbie Staples	Doug Stanley
David Nichols	Dick Hoover	Bud Nagelvoort
Nesha McRae (DEQ)	Don Kain (DEQ)	

MEETING SUMMARY

Nesha McRae, from the Virginia Department of Environmental Quality (VADEQ) provided an overview of the role of the agricultural working group in the planning process. She explained that the group is typically made up of local farmers, Soil and Water Conservation District and Natural Resources Conservation District staff, along with representatives from other organizations that work in agricultural conservation in the region. The group moved on to discuss the general status of agriculture in the Crooked, Stephens and West Runs and Willow Brook watersheds today. Suburban encroachment was identified as a real problem in the area. One participant stated that he thought that farming in the region would soon be a thing of the past due to an influx of people from the D.C. metro area. Another participant responded that he thought this view was too pessimistic and that Clarke County had implemented a number of planning and zoning ordinances and programs to protect local agriculture. Another participant stated that he thought that the Willow Brook watershed has been subject to far less development pressure than the other watersheds and that it was more likely to stay in agricultural land use. It was also noted that the Friends of the Shenandoah River received a grant to implement BMPs and do water quality monitoring in the Willow Brook watershed. The report that was produced as part of this project might be helpful in developing the implementation plan. DEQ staff explained that it makes sense to focus BMP implementation in areas that are more likely to remain in agricultural since those practices are more likely to stay in place beyond the typical ten year contract period.

Representatives from the Lord Fairfax SWCD noted that they have been working to develop an urban BMP program in order to address stormwater pollution resulting from increased urban and residential development in the region.

It was noted that more small organic farms are coming into the region, but that start up costs for larger operations are cost prohibitive. The Jet Farm, a 500-acre farm on Crooked Run has been for sale for the past 10 years. Many farms in the area are leased (at least 50%). Many of the landowners in the region are older and no longer farm their own land. It was noted that it's hard to even find land to lease in the region, and that it's very competitive when property comes up to lease. The group agreed that long term leases are much better for farmers than short term (1 year agreements), 5-10 years was noted as ideal. There are a number of absentee landowners in the area as well. DEQ staff explained that work has been underway in Augusta and Rockingham Counties to help farmers negotiate better lease agreements. Typically, these agreements are only for one year, making a farmer who is leasing land

reluctant to pay for any sort of management infrastructure on the property. If a longer lease agreement can be reached, the farmer may be more interested in implementing BMPs such as livestock exclusion systems. It was also noted that there has been an increase in the use of poultry litter in the watershed on both crop and hay land.

DEQ staff asked participants about potential partners for outreach activities. Participants suggested VA Cooperative Extension along with the local Farm Bureaus. It was noted that DEQ staff had reached out to local Farm Bureau leaders, but they were not in attendance. Participants agreed that phone calls were necessary in order to get better participation in meetings. Several participants offered to assist DEQ staff in identifying and contacting key farmers in the region for the next working group meeting. If the group was successful in getting more farmers to the table for the meeting, some additional background information like what was shared at the public meeting could be reviewed at the next working group meeting as well. Nesha agreed to work with David Beahm (Warren County Administrator) to follow up with farmers for the next meeting. Letters to landowners can also be effective, but some may require follow up correspondence in order to really get involved. It was also noted that door to door outreach efforts from NRCS had proved successful in the region. DEQ staff asked the group about local interest in conducting citizen monitoring for *E. coli* bacteria. This has proven to be a good way to get the community involved and keep people informed in other regions.

In order to gage local interest in different BMP options and identify the most suitable livestock exclusion fencing systems for inclusion in the plan, a survey was distributed to meeting participants. Everyone was asked to rank a series of BMPs along with a series of obstacles to livestock exclusion. The results are summarized in the two tables below:

Table 1. Potential best management practices for consideration. Average rankings are shown below (7 total) with 1 being the highest priority practice and 7 being the very lowest priority.

Best management practice	**Description**	**Rank (1-7)**
Streamside livestock exclusion fencing	Excluding livestock from streams with fencing, providing alternative water sources or limited access points to the stream	1
Rotational grazing	Establishing a series of grazing paddocks with cross fencing and rotating livestock to maximize forage production while preventing overgrazing	5
Forested streamside buffers	Planting trees and shrubs in strips (35 foot minimum) along streams adjacent to pasture and cropland	2
Grassed streamside buffers	Planting grasses in strips (35 foot minimum) along streams adjacent to pasture and cropland)	3
Forestation of crop, pasture or hayland	Convert existing pasture, crop or hayland to forest (hardwood or conifers,	4
Continuous no-till	Cropland is planted and maintained using no-till methods, only effective in reducing bacteria for cropland receiving manure applications (not commercial fertilizer)	5
Manure	Construction of planned system designed to manage	6

composting/storage facilities (equine)	solid equine waste from areas where horses are concentrated either through composting or storage	

Table 2. Obstacles to streamside livestock exclusion. Average rankings are shown below (5 total) with 1 being the most common obstacle to address and 5 being the least common obstacle.

Obstacle	**Rank (1-5)**
The cost of installing fencing and off stream water is too high, even with cost share assistance from federal and state programs	1
Cannot afford to give up the land for a 35 foot buffer	3
General maintenance of fencing is time consuming and expensive	2
Grazing land is rented with short term leases and landowners are not interested in installing and/or maintaining streamside fencing and off stream water	4
People do not trust the government and do not want to work through state and federal cost share programs to installing fencing systems	3

Nesha asked the group about other potential meeting locations in the watershed for the future and meeting times. Participants suggested having the meetings as early in March as possible since farmers will be getting busy in mid March. The group agreed that 6:30 p.m. was a good time for a meeting.